CONSIDER THE LILIES

October 19, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." --Matthew 6:28b, 29 (RSV)

Scripture
Matthew 6:25-29

That's why the trees are wrapped. We didn't tell Marian Vieux to do a visual exegesis of Matthew 6:28 and I can't say for sure but I don't think that is what she had in mind when she created a "living sculpture" by wrapping the trees around Fourth Presbyterian Church with bright colors, but that is what she has done for us and for the city. On Wednesday I was invited to lead a brief worship service for our new after school program for neighborhood children - youngsters who by 5:30 p.m. have been in a classroom environment for a long time, are tired, hungry, sweaty and ready for action - which is to say, it was hazardous duty. I decided to try to engage them in the devotions - so I asked if they had noticed anything different when they came to church that afternoon. They had. They had seen the trees. And they understood. When I asked "Why do you suppose we wrapped those trees?" - a question I had heard several times last week - they responded easily and accurately: "to make people notice them!" Exactly. "Consider the Lilies." We have not done it to discourage the Commission on Landmarks. It has nothing to do with that issue. Nor have we done it, as one passer-by concluded and announced, because the trees are sick and the colors indicate the place and nature of the infection: although having observed the public reactions to the project, I conclude that the effect has been therapeutic for the human spirit. We did it as part of an Arts Festival: we believe it is part of the mission of the church to say to the city what Jesus said one day to his disciples... "Consider the Lilies." The artist has succeeded wonderfully. A lot of people have looked at trees - a lot of people who otherwise would have bustled by - head down, leaning forward, striding meaningfully to the next appointment, have slowed, looked up, smiled and for a gracious moment, have indeed "considered the lilies."

It is in the Sermon on the Mount, a precious collection of Jesus' teaching about life, human destiny, human priorities. It is important material. It is singularly relevant. "Do not be anxious about your life... Look at the birds of the air. Consider the Lilies..."

"Lilies of the field," as a matter of fact, was an idiomatic way of referring to wild flowers. It could be an idiom - for the natural order - all of nature. It has been suggested that the scene is the mountain side, and that perhaps behind Jesus, or off to one side, was a sweeping, gradual incline of bright Scarlet Anenomes which looked like a giant, royal robe.

"How many times have you walked by a field of flowers like that and not even seen them?" he was asking. You are so tied up in anxiety about your life, so tied up in knots over what to wear to work tomorrow, or what's for dinner, or how in the world you will get done what you have to get done this week, that you have quite forgotten the steady, grace that energizes the whole universe. You are so tight you are acting as if the whole world depends on you and your schedule. Relax. Loosen up. "Consider the Lilies."

It was an important word for them. It is even more important for us...for our emotional and mental health, but also for our spiritual life. Jesus was saying an important word about God whose will and whose nature is somehow revealed in that smashing scarlet meadow...

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

> "Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush afire with God;
> But only he who sees takes off his shoes -
> The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."
> [Aurora Leigh, Book VII, line 820]

People were always asking Georgia O'Keefe why she painted those huge, wonderful flowers and what the flowers meant. She didn't like the question much because she thought the answer was so evident. Once she said -

> "Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not...it occurred to me to paint a flower so huge that it would make New Yorkers stand still and contemplate it."
> [Georgia O'Keefe, A Biography, -author-, p. 170]

The first item on Jesus' agenda was to get his friends to stop worrying long enough to see the beauty in front of their eyes: and then the connection between the beauty and the love of the one who created the beauty. Jesus wanted to save their souls, a part of which in this instance had to do with beholding, helping them to be able to see the common, the holiness which is part of the ordinary. Part of salvation - the best definition of which is "wholeness" is seeing the gracious providence of a creator with a fine eye for aesthetics. Look at what God has made. It is a very welcome word, spoken quietly in the midst of a civilization which seems designed to increase and enhance anxiety, to urge us to run faster and push harder, to keep our shoulders to the wheel, eyes on the goal, feet moving in the right direction, calendars full, schedules loaded. "Consider the Lilies." The lilies - or the trees - don't need our help, of course. But we have boxed them in so thoroughly, and boxed ourselves in with the anxieties that are produced by our pace of life that we do need the gracious word of Jesus, or the gentle reminder of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or O'Keefe's wonderful flowers - or the wrapped trees. Look at what God has made!

From the perspective of religion, art says that and does that, whether it starts out to say and do it or not. In arranging shapes, color, words, sound, art is conveying a sense of the wonder and beauty of the

world. Sometimes art has to clamor for our attention. Sometimes the music has to be insistent and dissonant and the shapes abrasive and the colors raucous. Sometimes art has to work hard to persuade people to see.

But it grows - always - out of a deep reverence and love for the world. Art and religion, that is to say, begin at the same starting point, and are siblings, Ted Gill has observed. Both start with wonder and awe before the mystery of creation, gratitude for the created order, celebration of the world and everything in it. The City of Chicago, the Museum of Natural History and this Church were honored this year by the visit of Te Maori - the religious art and artifacts of the indigenous Maori people of New Zealand. A large contingent of Maori people came to Chicago for the opening of the exhibit and subsequently worshiped with us. They were here because their art is synonymous with their spiritual heritage. It is only in recent history that works of art have been displayed in frames on walls of museums and homes. To look at Te Maori was to learn that art originally had to do with the practice of religion and ordinarily it helped people express reverence and gratitude for the created order.

Sometimes words alone are not sufficient. Sometimes the affections of the heart demand a gesture. And so when we want to say "I love you" we buy a rose bud, or when we want to convey deep sympathy, we make a casserole, or when we want to say thank you to God we build a cathedral or write a poem or sing a hymn. That's why sacred liturgy has employed chanting - because saying the words doesn't quite get the meaning expressed. John Calvin was arguably one of the greatest intellects ever to think about the meaning of Christianity. The great truths of faith, Calvin said, should be put to music. Creeds should be sung, not recited so as not to give the impression that all the truth to which they point may be exhausted by our descriptions of it.

Art and religion both originate with a deep reverence for the world. How sad it is, therefore, that so much conventional religious expression seems to tilt in the opposite direction, away from the world.

The Biblical tradition begins with a true story that invites the reader to fall in love with the world. The creation account in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis contain an important and radical word about creation and the creator. It is a word which is similar to what Jesus said to his disciple. "Consider the Lilies." It is a word that is often missed in the debates about historical accuracy, biological precision and the exact historical time frame. The word here is that there is one God. God is good. God's creation is good; in fact, it is very good.

The first people to read Genesis 1 - or more probably to hear the story needed a saving word from the Lord. Their lives - their very existence as a people was in danger. Defeated by the Babylonians, captured, taken to a foreign land and held in exile, the children of Israel were subjected to all the pressures which living in an alien culture could exert on them. In addition Babylonian religion - which must have seemed very appealing - exposed them to one of the oldest religious ideas around, namely that there were at least two gods: a god of the heavens, the spiritual places and the god of the world, the creator of the earth. The

tangible world was suspect in Babylonian religion, tempting, sensual, sinful, ultimately evil.

God's people needed a saving word - and what it got was a poem about creation - a work of art which contains important truth - saving truth. The wonderful theology in Genesis contains the radical assertion that creation is good: that the creator is deeply committed to the creation; that the process of creation is still going on and that God's people have a part in that process.

There's a sense in which Babylonian religion keeps creeping into our faith. Early Christianity flirted with Greek thinking that was remarkably like Babylonian dualism and sometimes it came out with a decidedly other-worldly flavor to it. Christianity has always had to work hard not to come across as world denying, world hating, world avoiding piety. At times we have acted as if "natural" meant "lower," "evil," "bad," as if God made a mistake when we were created with bodies and appetites. We have celebrated celibacy and tried to ignore or deny sexuality. And so we have, at times, been suspicious of the arts precisely because they were so worldly. We were suspicious of sculpture precisely because it celebrates the beauty of the human body and dance because it celebrates the beauty of human movement and painting because it celebrates the sensual beauty of the world.

In our more extreme and least attractive moments - we have turned on the arts as a threat and following the Reformation, for instance, in righteous zeal, ripped intricately carved wood screens out of the cathedrals and smashed the sculptures and burned the paintings and outlawed musical instruments. Fortunately the inclination to beauty is so deep within us that when it is stamped out in one place it emerges at another. Even in the Nazi death camps people wrote poetry and drew pictures. And so Protestantism developed its own forms of beauty - in spite of itself. But in Highland parishes to this day, you will not find even so much as a cross - so suspicious were our forebears of tangible, sensual beauty.

What if our greater sin is loving the world too little, not too much? What if the genius of both Judaism and Christianity is a profound love for the created order precisely because God created it and it is good? What if the better morality is a worldly morality based on the premise that the world and everything in it is part of God's intention? Perhaps the other worldliness of religion does not belong beside the Gospel.

Non-religious observers suggest that the environmental crises is only possible for a civilization which does not reverence the creation. Ecologist Lynn White, for instance, holds religion responsible for the unfeeling, uncaring exploitation of the natural world by our civilization. And moral philosophers continue to ponder the meaning of our uninterrupted willingness to spend our treasure making weapons, chemical and nuclear, the effect - if not the purpose of which - is to reverse the creative love of God by making war on all of life. Perhaps we don't need more other-worldly piety. Perhaps we need to fall in love again with God's world...Perhaps we need most to "Consider the lilies."

It is deep within us...that love is. God put it there. The little children knew immediately why the trees are wrapped. When you visit a

museum and see those graceful small figurines carved four thousand years ago, - men, women, horses, children...think about what it means that the artist, the person who did the carving, was not hunting or gathering food in a time when providing food was a total occupation. Ponder how near the essence of humanness art must be because those primitive societies somehow concluded that what the artist was doing was important. We are the creatures on the evolutionary ladder, Rollo May wrote, who paused, picked up a burnt stick and drew a picture on a cave wall.

At Lascaux, France, on the walls of the caves are beautiful paintings of bison, horses, deer, enormous black mammals with curly hair - and the handprints of the people who painted them -- 15,000 years ago.

It's as if there is an eleventh commandment which Moses forgot to include in the first 10... Rollo May suggested. It's as if the creator said: "Thou shalt make thyself and thy world beautiful, for this is why I sent my gardeners, Adam and Eve, to cultivate the flowers in Eden. And this is why I have made the twilight and the springtime so radiant with splendor." [My Search for Beauty, Rollo May, p. 230]

It is our lot, it seems, to be anxious. To be human is to worry. "What, me worry?" strikes us as a funny thing to say precisely because we know how much of our lives we invest in worrying. Jesus knew that his friends were worrying about this and that: about things they could control -like food and clothing; and about things they couldn't control - like physical size and how long they would live. Jesus knew that to be human is to be anxious. And he knew that beneath all the surface worrying we do there is profound anxiety. Anxiety over what the philosophers call non-being, our mortality, the reality of the shadow of death which is anticipated in every life by the dark night of the soul.

Jesus knew that we have a highly developed capacity for worry: that we can worry about food and clothing, about the test we have to take and the report to complete. He knew that we can work up a fairly severe case of anxiety about the money we don't have, the behavior of our children, or the sermon we have to write. He knew that sometimes we awake at 3:00 a.m. anxious about - we don't know what. And he knew that behind all that worrying - in fact, the source of all that worry, is the deeper anxiety, the nameless, faceless fear of our demise.

How interesting that his response - the content of his response to the basic dilemma of our humanness - was not a lengthy sermon, not a philosophical argument, but a work of art... "Consider the Lilies" he said. The God who loves the world enough to make this beauty, loves you. The God who created the world can be counted on to love you, to be gracious to you, to care for you forever. Jesus' response to the basic human anxiety is an invitation to see, to enjoy with the senses, to fall in love with the world. It is part of what salvation means - yours, mine - and the world's.

The real trouble with that worrying is that when you're worrying you're not living as fully as you could be living, and as God wants you to live.

Those crusty old Presbyterian theologians in the 17th Century might

not have been very enthusiastic about Michelangelo's nudes and cheerful Renaissance music - but they knew the essence of the Biblical word when they wrote a catechism and began it like this -

"What is the chief end of man?"

"Our chief end," they answered "is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever."

Edna St. Vincent Millay gathers that up for me...I get it out every year and read it:

"O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy mists, they roll and rise!
Thy woods, this Autumn day, that ache and sag,
And all but cry with colour!
Lord, I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year."

Jesus said <u>Consider the Lilies</u>. Amen.